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Women and Power: Women in Politics

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Are women making progress in the political arena, or are their frustrations at access to elective office severe enough to warrant their own political party? This article examines the statistics and argues that women should seize political power by voting as a bloc. As loyalty to traditional parties declines while their interest in and sensitivity to social issues grows, the moment is right for a real increase in women's political power.

Frequently cocktail conversation around the Stone house these days revolves around the question "Do women have 'real' power?" Leaving aside for the moment our inability to define "real" power with clarity, the question is an interesting one. Many of the public policy options that would bring economic benefit to women must be developed and funded by those holding elective and senior appointive office. A national policy on such issues as child care and health insurance are two such examples, and the list of other issues of interest to women is long. Therefore, increasing the number of women in those public positions is a critical factor in achieving empowerment for women. How have we done?

Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?

On one hand, we have seen, since 1975, an explosion of women in elective office (see Table 1). Between 1975 and 1983 more than 12,000 women were elected as city councilors, mayors, county commissioners, state legislators, statewide officeholders, and members of Congress. In 1990 more women than ever serve in the United States Congress — twenty-eight members. Three women serve as governors — Madeleine Kunin, a Vermont Democrat elected in 1984 and reelected to subsequent two-year terms; Kay Orr, a Nebraska Republican elected in 1986; and Rose Moffert, an Arizona Democrat who has just announced her retirement. Including these three women serving in 1990, a total of nine women — eight Democrats and one Republican — have served as governors in the history of our country.

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Table 1

Percentages of Women in Elective Offices

Level of Office	1975	1977	1979	1981	1983	1985	1987	1989
U.S. Congress	4%	4%	3%	4%	4%	5%	5%	5%
Statewide elective[a]	10%	8%	11%	11%	13%	14%	15%	14%[b]
State legislatures	8%	9%	10%	12%	13%	15%	16%	17%
Country governing boards[c]	3%	4%	5%	6%	8%	8%[d]	9%	9%[e]
Mayors & municipal/township governing boards	4%	8%	10%	10%	NA[f]	14%[g]	NA[f]	NA

a. These numbers do not include officials appointed to state cabinet-level positions; officials elected to executive posts by the legislature; members of the judicial branch; or elected members of university boards of trustees or boards of education.

b. Although there has been an increase in the number of women serving, the percentage decrease between 1987 and 1989 (14.6% to 13.6%) reflects a change in the base used to calculate this percentage (from 43 out of 295 in 1987 to 45 out of 330 in 1989).

c. The three states without county governing boards are Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

d. 1984

e. 1988

f. CAWP currently updates municipal figures every four years.

g. Includes data from Washington, D.C. States for which data were incomplete and therefore not included are Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Source: Statistics from the Center for the American Woman and Politics (CAWP), Rutgers University, June 1989.

Two women currently serve in the United States Senate — Republican Nancy Landon Kassebaum of Kansas and Democrat Barbara Mikulski of Maryland. During 1984 a record number of women were nominated by their parties to run for senator — six Democrats and four Republicans, for a total of ten. Nancy Kassebaum, the only incumbent seeking reelection, was the lone winner.

The more women who run for office, the more women are elected. The most recent state legislature data (1986) shows that the figures for women candidates winning state legislative office varied from 82 percent in Massachusetts (30 of 45) and Arkansas (9 of 11) to 27 percent in Nevada (3 of 11).[1]

At the cabinet level, President Bush has appointed Elizabeth Hanford Dole as secretary of Labor, and Carla Anderson Hills is our chief trade representative. While hers is not a cabinet position, Hills holds a crucial White House post that drives our foreign trade policy. Certainly the increase in participants in elected and senior appointive politics leads us to conclude that women have more power than they had in the past.

In spite of these considerable gains, we could also see the picture as bleak. Women represent more than 50 percent of the population, but in no area of public life do we equal that representation. In 1985 women comprised 14.3 percent of mayors and municipal council members. In 1989 women comprised 16.9 percent of the 7,461 state legislators in the United States. Of that total, 737, or 58.5 percent, were Democrats and 514, or 40.8 percent, were Republicans. Only two women were speakers of a house in 1989 — Republican Jane Hawler of Arizona and Democrat Vera Katz of Oregon. The number of women in the Senate in 1989 was the same as in the 1960s.

Do these statistics mean that there is a "glass ceiling" on political power in the United States? Do they mean that women who divert their energies to traditional family roles may never be able to participate in the halls of power in great numbers? Do they mean that younger women are less inclined to exercise their feminist views through political life?

Common Values Create a Power Bloc

One can only conclude that if sheer numbers of elected officials is the criterion, women have less power. Without significant restructuring of our society, women may always be underrepresented in elective office. How then will we make our voices heard, fulfill our vision? How will we encourage more women to join the political process as candidates? We must harness our awareness of one another and create a feminist political voting bloc.

Women's lives, and thus their experiences, are different from men's. In spite of the fact that well over a majority of women of childbearing age are in the workplace, studies continue to inform us that women still have the major responsibility for domestic tasks. Available child care is expensive, and child care is often unavailable at any price. Aging parents are demanding financial assistance and care from their daughters. Women are traditionally paid less than men. This is true in professions heavily dominated by women, such as teaching, nursing, and social work, as well as those in which women are scarce. Many women, as heads of household, are required to commit most of their economic resources to child rearing.

If their lifestyles leave little time, money, or energy for public office, they do give women a shared view of the world. As a consequence, women, whether as public servants or voters on public policy issues, are more likely than men to take progressive stands on key policy issues, regardless of whether they call themselves feminists.[2] By progressive stands I mean a willingness to use government to solve social and educational problems. African-American women are more likely than other women to take a liberal feminist stand on issues. For example, during the debate on the Equal Rights Amendment, women elected officeholders were more likely than their male counterparts to favor ratification of the ERA.[3] Women in elective office are more likely than their male colleagues to oppose a constitutional ban on abortion.[4] The gap was smallest at the municipal level and largest at the state level. But this gap was consistently different from men at all levels of office, within both political parties and across the ideological spectrum. Republican women, for example, expressed more liberal and feminist views than Republican men. At the federal level, the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues has promoted a variety of issues such as ERA, employment opportunities for women, and women's health concerns. They have also sought assistance for women business owners, programs for victims of domestic violence, and dependent child-care and parental-leave legislation.[5] Women in state legislatures, as in West Virginia in 1987, crossed party lines to secure a legislative override of the governor's veto of a bill providing medical care assistance for poor pregnant women and poor children.[6] This behavior is not new. It was Republican Winifred C. Stanley of New York who, in 1943, introduced one of the first equal pay bills. It was Edith Green who, in 1963, led the Equal Pay Act through Congress.

It has long been observed that there is a gender gap in voting. Women voters played a significant role in electing John F. Kerry as U.S. senator from Massachusetts. When Michael S. Dukakis was ahead by 17 percent in the polls in the 1988 election, his lead among women was by a far greater margin than among men.[7]

Yet the potential for concerted action by women has never been harnessed. Only eight states — California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Jersey — have women's PACs. California has six; most states have none. We are not a voting bloc like the Boston Irish of the 1930s and 1940s or the white Southern Democrats of the 1950s. It is likely that we will never be that politically rote. Governor Made-

leine Kunin noted that women "sometimes hold ourselves back because we don't approve of the way [politics] is played." Women loathe the crude and demanding mores of politics.

A 1990 Issue for Cohesion

Help in the form of history is on the way. Recent events are conspiring to propel women into more concerted political action. Of overriding importance is the reaction of women to the Supreme Court's decision in the *Webster* case. By a 5 to 4 majority, the Supreme Court held that states have authority to limit the rights of women to decide whether to bring a pregnancy to term. As many women born in the 1960s have come of age with no memory of a time when abortions or birth control were limited, the *Webster* decision has become a defining event. It is a concrete realization that the rights of women must be secured more firmly than they are today. In many states, such as Massachusetts, the stance of the gubernatorial candidates on choice may be the major topic defining them and their chances of success. Choice issues are only part of the picture.

A Voting Bloc Across Party Lines

What were traditionally considered women's issues have come to the forefront of national policymaking. Drug-affected youths are creating heretofore unheard-of high murder rates in our central cities. While drugs have long been a concern of women, now that the very stability of our cities is threatened, it is a mainstream issue. Youth who would come into businesses, to run the businesses of tomorrow, are dying before their time. Drugs, children, and education have hit the front page. Environmental issues, long expressed concerns of women's organizations such as the League of Women Voters, have become, in New England, the principal concern of all voters, according to recent opinion polls. Environmental safety, once viewed as a "soft issue," became one of the principal focuses of the 1988 presidential election.

This has created a competition between the two dominant political parties for voters holding progressive views on these issues. The Democratic Party, while still dominant in registration figures, is rife with divisions based on class, race, and geography. Women's views are less defined by these categories. As it struggles to maintain its dominance in American political life against a feisty challenge by the Republicans, the Democratic Party needs women to keep it together. Conversely, the Republican Party, eager to win majorities in state gubernatorial races and races for the U.S. Congress, is seeking to expand its traditional base to previously unrepresented groups such as liberal women and minorities. When attendees at the 1989 National Organization for Women (NOW) national conference spontaneously demanded a new party to address feminist issues, spokesmen for both Democrats and Republicans rushed to stop the movement. Democratic National Committee Chairman Ron Brown wooed women with a recitation of contributions Democrats have made to feminist causes. Republican National Committee Chairman Lee Atwater reminded women of the Republican role in promoting the ERA as far back as 1924.

Even world affairs conspire to give validity to one of the paramount women's issues — peace. With Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union shifting their economies into economic development, we can do likewise for many of the same reasons. We can no longer afford war. We must grapple with shifting the U.S. economy from a war-based to a peace-based one.

Solving our social problems will require cooperation, compromise, and caring. No one can merely order an inner-city child to get a Ph.D. No one can order a business executive to devise new processes that do not create hazardous wastes. Such solutions need less adversarial and more consensus-building politics. By exercising power, women will validate their own values. It is a nourishing circle.

We are better able to take this sophisticated next step. Fifteen years ago feminist leaders were housewives, teachers, and social workers. Now we have savvy political operatives like Democrat Susan Estrich, Republican Peggy Noonan, and hundreds of others who have operated campaigns since the 1970s. Money will come from female bankers, lawyers, entrepeneurs, and business executives who more resemble their male counterparts than their 1970s predecessors, who held bake sales to raise airfares to feminist meetings. The confluence of the decline of parties, the rise of social issues to the front pages, and the increased political sensitivity of women brought on by the *Webster* case all bring together a series of events that women can use to further their goal of achieving greater power in the society at large.

A Political Strategy for the Future

If women join together in their own political parties to promote feminist views, and do it successfully, we can leave the 1989–1991 election cycles with political commitments to promote feminist issues and appoint women to public office. New, younger women will seek elective office. Blocs of voters are hard to come by, but our common view of the world can be translated into votes. Votes can be translated into jobs. Jobs can be translated into power. And the process goes on as we work hard toward a society in which background and circumstance mean less and less in terms of the future reach of each individual. We must take life as it is and mold it to what we want. The opportunities are there for us to change the existing statistics and for women of all races and classes to exercise power and bring feminist values to the body politic.❧

Notes

1. National Women's Political Caucus, "National Directory of Women Elected Officials," 1987.
2. Bringing More Women into Public Office, a project of Center for the American Woman and Politics, "Women's Routes to Elective Office," June 1984.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Women's Research and Education Institute, "The American Woman 1988–89, A Status Report," ed. Sara E. Ricks (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 108.
6. Ibid., 109.
7. Chris Black and Thomas Oliphant, *All by Myself* (Chester, Conn.: Pequot Press, 1989), Chapter 12.